Patterns of Power — a framework paper

THE HEADLESS ORDER

Why the coordination that cannot be built into a state is the same coordination that cannot be captured by a conqueror — the trade-off between reach and resilience, and why history is largely the record of the concentrated devouring the diffuse and then writing the diffuse down as backward.

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The observation

Set two kinds of society side by side and a pattern shows that is easy to miss because we usually only look at one half of it.

The first kind concentrates its power. Authority pools upward into an office — a throne, a council with a fixed seat, a treasury, a standing command — so that at the top of the society there is a *thing*: a position that speaks for the whole, collects from the whole, and can commit the whole to war or peace. This kind of society can do what concentration is for. It can raise and feed a standing army, tax at scale, pool surplus into roads and walls and granaries and a literate bureaucracy, hold a coherent foreign policy, and act as one body. It is, in the ordinary sense, *strong*.

The second kind refuses that concentration. Its power stays diffuse — spread across lineages, clans, age-sets, villages, chiefs who lead by influence rather than command — so that at the top of the society there is *no thing*: no office that binds the rest, no seat whose holder speaks for all, no treasury, no apex. This kind of society cannot do most of what the first kind does. It cannot mass and sustain a great army, cannot tax at scale, cannot build the monument or the road, cannot act as one. It is, in the ordinary sense, *weak* — and it is routinely described, by the strong societies

that write the histories, as primitive, backward, tribal, a people who "failed to develop."

Here is the thing the ordinary account misses. The very property that makes the second kind weak in peace makes it nearly impossible to conquer in war — and it is the *same* property, viewed from two directions. A society with no apex has no point of capture. There is no throne to seize, no capital whose fall ends the war, no elite whose purchase delivers the population, no tax-machine to inherit. The conqueror can win every battle and hold nothing, because there was never a single thing that, once taken, meant he held the rest. The headless order is hard to build into a state for exactly the reason it is hard for anyone else to capture: there is no head.

This paper is about that trade-off — reach against resilience, capacity against capturability — and about the grim way it usually resolves, which is that the concentrated societies slowly and expensively digest the diffuse ones, and then record the diffuse ones' greatest strength as mere backwardness, because the winners are the ones who kept the seat and the winners keep the record.

The trade-off stated plainly

Strip the moral vocabulary off it and the trade-off is a single design choice about where a society keeps its coordination, and the choice has a cost on each side that cannot be escaped.

Concentrate the coordination into an apex and you buy capacity at the price of a fatal address. Now the society can mass force, raise revenue, and act as one — and now it has a neck. A rival who takes the apex takes the whole apparatus with it, because the whole apparatus was built to run *from* the apex. The stronger the concentration, the greater the reach and the cleaner the kill: an empire perfectly organised around a sovereign centre is an empire that can be inherited entire by whoever seizes that centre.

Diffuse the coordination across many small units and you buy resilience at the price of reach. Now no rival can take the whole by taking a part, because the parts do not run from a centre — they run from themselves, and the reduction of one buys nothing toward the next. But the same absence of a centre that denies the conqueror his target denies the society its capacity: there is no apex to mass the army, bank the grain, or commit the whole, so the society cannot do the large things, and in a world of concentrated neighbours it is perpetually out-massed, out-taxed, out-built.

Neither setting is safe against everything, and that is the heart of it. Concentration is strong against rivals it can out-mass and fatally weak against decapitation. Diffusion

is nearly immune to decapitation and fatally weak against slow attrition by a concentrated power that can afford to reduce it piece by piece. **A society cannot be both un-decapitatable and able to mass at scale, because the thing that lets it mass at scale is the very apex that gives it a head to cut off.** Every real society sits somewhere on this dial, and where it sits is not a measure of how advanced its people are but of which danger its history taught it to fear most.

What the anthropologists saw — each catching one face

Four thinkers, working in four different centuries and traditions, each caught a different face of this single trade-off. It is worth walking through them not to defer to authority but because each one saw a real edge of the thing, and set together they show the whole.

The first is the British anthropologist **E. E. Evans-Pritchard**, who in 1940 studied the Nuer, a cattle-herding people of the southern Sudan, and gave the pattern its enduring name. The Nuer, he found, had no chiefs with any power to command, no standing force, no courts, no law in the codified sense — and yet across a wide territory their society held together, feuds were contained, cooperation happened. He called such a society *acephalous* — literally headless — and described its structure as one of "balanced opposition": nested layers of lineage, from the smallest family up to the largest clan, each a distinct unit that could stand against a unit of like size, fusing upward against a larger threat and splitting downward when the threat passed. The order did not come from a centre issuing commands; it came from the segments balancing one another. Evans-Pritchard's contribution was to prove that headlessness is not chaos — that a society genuinely without an apex can be *organised*, can hold order across space, and can do it through the relations of its parts rather than through a peak. He established that the headless order is a real form of political life, not the absence of one.

The second is the American anthropologist **Marshall Sahlins**, who in 1961 asked what such a headless structure was *good for*, and gave an answer that turns the "weakness" reading on its head. In an essay on what he called the segmentary lineage as "an organization of predatory expansion," Sahlins argued that the very fusion-and-fission that Evans-Pritchard described made these societies formidable at *taking territory* from their neighbours. The mechanism he named is the crucial one: because the segments fuse against an outside threat, a quarrel begun by one small lineage draws in all its relatives against the enemy — "all of us against them" — so that the whole confederation can be mobilised for a fight without any central command

ordering the mobilisation. The society massed not by a chief's decree but by the automatic upward fusion of its own structure. Sahlins's contribution was to show that diffusion is not merely a defensive weakness but can be an *offensive* asset — that a headless order can expand at the expense of more centralised or smaller neighbours precisely because its power to combine does not depend on a leader who could be killed or bought. The strength lives in the structure, not in a man.

The third, reaching back six centuries, is the North African historian **Ibn Khaldun**, who in the *Muqaddimah* of 1377 built an entire cyclical theory of history on this trade-off, and who saw — earlier and more clearly than anyone — how it resolves over time. His engine was a concept he called *ʿasabiyya*, usually rendered "group feeling" or social solidarity: the fierce mutual loyalty that binds a kin-group into a single force capable of collective action. Asabiyya, he argued, is bred in hardship — in the desert and the margin, where survival demands absolute mutual reliance — and it is strongest exactly among the diffuse tribal peoples the settled empires despised. A group rich in asabiyya, hungry and hard, conquers the soft sedentary civilisation whose own solidarity has dissolved in luxury and security. But then — and this is the part that closes our loop — the conquering group, installed in power and wealth, loses over three or four generations the very solidarity that won it the throne, because the conditions that bred the solidarity are gone. Its cohesion dissolves into faction and individualism; it grows soft; and a new hard group from the margin conquers it in turn. Ibn Khaldun's contribution to our trade-off is the time dimension: he saw that the diffuse periphery's asabiyya is what lets it overthrow the concentrated centre, and that the act of winning — of becoming the centre — is what destroys the asabiyya, so that the periphery's strength is self-consuming. The tribe conquers the state and, in conquering it, becomes a state, and begins to decay. **The headless order's cohesion is a thing it can spend only by ceasing to be headless.**

The fourth is the American political scientist **James Scott**, who in 2009 added the piece that most inverts the standard story: that headlessness is often a *choice*. Studying the hill peoples of upland Southeast Asia — a vast mountainous zone he called Zomia, spanning the margins of several states — Scott argued that their diffusion, mobility, and statelessness were not the marks of peoples "left behind" by civilisation but deliberate, reactive adaptations to *evade* the valley states that would otherwise have taxed, conscripted, and enslaved them. The hill peoples were, in his provocative phrase, "barbaric by design": they kept their societies dispersed, their agriculture mobile, their leadership fluid, and their memory oral rather than written, precisely because every one of these features made them illegible and uncapturable to a state that fed on legible, concentrated, settled populations. Scott's contribution is the

recognition that the headless form can be a *strategy* — that peoples who lived beside predatory states sometimes chose diffusion as a defence, dismantling or refusing the apex on purpose so as to present the state with nothing to grip. Statelessness, in this reading, is not a stage before the state; it is sometimes a considered answer to the state.

Set the four together and the whole trade-off stands out. Evans-Pritchard: the headless order is real and organised. Sahlins: its diffusion can be an offensive strength, massing without command. Ibn Khaldun: that strength is what conquers states, and is consumed in the conquering. Scott: the headless form can be a deliberate defence against capture. Each caught one face; the object they were all touching is the single trade-off between reach and resilience, and the way it cuts.

The evidence: the headless are the expensive conquests

The proposition can be tested, and the test is simple: if diffusion is resilience-against-capture, then the diffuse societies should be the ones that cost their conquerors the most — the ones conquered late, expensively, incompletely, or never — and the concentrated societies should be the ones taken cheaply, at a stroke, by seizing the centre. The record bears this out across cultures with a consistency that is hard to explain any other way.

Take the cheap conquests first, the concentrated societies taken by capturing the apex. The Spanish took the Aztec empire essentially by seizing its centre — a tributary empire run from a single capital through a single sovereign, and once Tenochtitlan and the person of the emperor fell, the apparatus of tribute was there to be inherited. The same logic delivered the Inca. In northern Nigeria, as a study in this collection details at length, the British took the Sokoto Caliphate — thirty emirates resting on inheritable offices and a believed creed a century deep — by defeating its army and sitting down in the emir's chair, thereafter ruling ten million people through the caliphate's own tax-apparatus with roughly one British officer per hundred thousand subjects. In every case the concentration that made the society strong made it *cheap to capture*, because the conqueror did not have to subdue the population — he had only to take the seat the population already obeyed.

Now the expensive conquests, the diffuse societies with no seat to seize. The Kikuyu of Kenya — farmers coordinating through lineage estates, age-sets, and graded councils of elders, with authority deliberately never pooled into an apex — cost the British sixty years of the most expensive hold in their African empire: no chief to inherit, so a chief had to be *manufactured*, and held up by force, and the whole order run on pass-laws and camps and surveillance because there was no

believed apex to run it cheaply. The Afghans, a coalition of armed chiefs that had never cooled into a state, expelled the British twice, once with the near-total destruction of an army, because there was no seat to install a puppet in that the chiefs would obey and no centre whose capture ended anything. The Iroquois Confederacy of the North American woodlands — five, later six, nations bound in a council that required unanimity and left each nation's internal affairs to itself — held the balance between the French and British empires for a century and described themselves, with reason, as the people the European settlers could not conquer; there was no single power whose defeat delivered the whole. The Scottish Highland clans, a patchwork of kin-groups under chiefs who led by mutual obligation rather than sovereign command, resisted the reach of the central state for centuries in terrain that gave every glen its own defence.

The pattern is not subtle. Where coordination had concentrated into a seizable apex, the society fell cheaply to whoever took the apex. Where coordination stayed diffuse, the society was murderously expensive to reduce and often could not be reduced at all by ordinary conquest. **The strength that shows in peace and the strength that shows in war are inversely related, and they are the same variable read at two moments: concentration buys peacetime capacity and wartime fragility; diffusion buys peacetime weakness and wartime resilience.**

How the headless order actually falls

But the headless orders do, mostly, fall in the end — the Kikuyu were ruled, the Highlands were pacified, the Iroquois were broken, the Afghans were fenced. So the resilience is not immortality, and it is worth being exact about *how* a headless order is finally subdued, because the manner of its fall completes the theory and reveals its deepest turn.

A headless order is almost never captured the way a concentrated one is — by seizing a centre — because there is no centre. It falls in one of two other ways, and both are expensive, and both change the conqueror as much as the conquered.

The first way is grinding attrition followed by *manufacture*. Having no seat to seize, the conqueror reduces the society piece by piece at ruinous cost — glen by glen, valley by valley, lineage by lineage — and then, because he cannot rule a headless population directly forever, he *builds the head that was never there*: he appoints a paramount chief where none existed, installs a puppet on a throne the society never had, forges the apex the diffuse order had refused to grow. This is what the British did in Kenya, manufacturing paramount chiefs out of men the old order had no seat for,

and it is what they tried in Afghanistan, installing a claimant on a Kabul throne that commanded no obedience it did not rent. The manufactured head is brittle, precisely because it is forged rather than inherited — it draws on no belief the society already holds — and holding it up is a permanent expense. But it gives the conqueror the thing his tools were built for: a point of contact, a seat, a something to deal with.

The second way is subtler and more permanent: the conqueror, or a native strongman he sponsors, *induces the centralisation the society had refused*, and then rules through the new centre. This is the deeper resolution, and Ibn Khaldun would have recognised it. In Afghanistan, after two failed occupations, the British finally got their buffer not by conquering the country but by recognising and subsidising Abdur Rahman Khan — a genuine Afghan warlord who then spent twenty-one years welding the fractured tribes into a state by his own sword and his own terror, concentrating the coordination the confederation had always resisted into an apex his heirs would inherit as simply the way Afghanistan was. In the Scottish Highlands, after the clans were defeated at Culloden in 1746, the decisive dismantling came not by the sword but, as one account puts it, by "policy, paperwork, and profit": the chief who had been a father and warleader bound to his people by mutual obligation was converted by law into a *landlord* — a legal owner of the ground rather than a kinsman on it — and the kin-order, its apex quietly transformed into a node of the central state's property system, dissolved from within. The clan did not fall to an army; it fell to being centralised.

And here is the turn that the whole paper has been building toward. **When a headless order finally falls, its conquest tends to arrive as the birth of the very centralisation it had spent centuries avoiding.** The conqueror cannot capture a head, so he must grow one — by manufacture, by sponsored strongman, or by converting the diffuse chiefs into agents of his own centralised apparatus — and the head, once grown, is what finally makes the population ruleable, cheaply, at last. The diffuse order's resistance to conquest is exactly what forces its conquest to take the form of centralisation. It cannot be inherited; it can only be *replaced* with something inheritable. Evans-Pritchard's acephalous Nuer, Sahlins's expanding lineages, Scott's deliberately stateless hill peoples — all of them, when the concentrated world finally closes on them, are not captured but *given a head*, and it is the head that holds them thereafter.

There is one more anthropological observation that seals this, and it is the plainest of all: under strong states, segmentary and diffuse systems are actively suppressed — not tolerated as backward curiosities but broken as *competing powers*. The concentrated state does not merely out-compete the headless order; it recognises the

headless form itself as a rival mode of organising human loyalty, and it sets out to destroy that form and replace it with its own apex, because two systems of ultimate loyalty cannot occupy the same ground. The clan chief converted to a landlord, the confederation's council dissolved, the age-set outlawed, the lineage cross-cut by an administrative boundary — these are the concentrated order stamping out the headless one not by accident but by design, because the headless form is the one thing a state cannot digest while it remains headless.

The recursion, and the record

Two final turns, because they are what make the pattern not merely a curiosity of conquest but a key to how history gets written.

The first is the recursion. The apex that the conqueror grows or sponsors — Abdur Rahman's forged state, the colonial administration's manufactured chiefs, the landlord-chief of the cleared Highlands — does not stay a raw imposition. Over generations, if it holds, it cools. The great-grandchildren of the people who were centralised by force are born into a world where the centre simply *is* — where the state, the office, the apex is as natural and unquestioned as the headless order had once been. The concentration that was imposed becomes, in time, the furniture of reality, and the memory of the headless world that could not be conquered but also could not be a state fades into "the way things were, before things were properly organised." This is the same recursion that runs through every case in this collection: an order built by force, if it takes, becomes real, and its built origin is forgotten. The headless order and the state that replaces it are two moments in one long process, and the trade-off between them is resolved, almost always, in favour of the apex — not because the apex is better for the people under it, but because a world full of concentrated states punishes the headless order twice, out-competing it in peace and grinding it down in war, until only the versions with a seizable, ruleable, inheritable head survive to be recorded.

Which is the second turn, and the sharpest: the record itself is kept by the concentrated. Writing, archives, chronicles, the whole apparatus of history is a technology of the apex — it requires the surplus, the scribes, the bureaucracy that only concentration produces. The headless orders, being diffuse, were largely oral, and left few records of their own; what survives of them is mostly what the concentrated states wrote *about* them, and the concentrated states wrote them down as their conquest required them to be seen — as backward, tribal, anarchic, a barbarism awaiting the order the state would bring. The very feature that made the

headless order strong against conquest — its refusal of the apex that produces scribes and archives — is the feature that ensured it could not tell its own story, so that its strength survives in the record only as weakness, its resistance only as savagery, its deliberate statelessness only as a failure to develop. **The headless order is written down as backward by the only people positioned to write it down at all — the ones who centralised, and who therefore won both the war and the account of it.** Scott's whole achievement was to read that record against its grain and recover the choice beneath the "backwardness"; the point generalises. When a concentrated source describes a diffuse people as primitive, it is describing, in the language of the victor, the exact property that cost the victor the most to overcome.

The law, stated

The pattern, then, reduced to its spine:

Coordination can be concentrated into a seizable apex or diffused across un-seizable parts, and the choice is a trade-off that cannot be escaped: concentration buys reach and capacity at the price of a fatal address; diffusion buys resilience against capture at the price of reach and capacity. The concentrated societies are strong in peace and cheap to conquer, because taking the apex takes the whole. The diffuse societies are weak in peace and murderously expensive to conquer, because there is no apex to take and the reduction of each part buys nothing toward the next. A headless order, when it finally falls, is not captured but *given a head* — the conqueror grows the centralisation the order had refused, by manufacture or by sponsored strongman, and rules through the new apex, which over generations cools into the furniture of reality. And the whole process is recorded by the concentrated victors, who write the diffuse order's greatest strength down as mere backwardness, because they kept the seat and the scribes, and the winners keep the record.

The trade-off is why tribal confederations "do not progress" and also why they cannot be easily conquered, and these are not two facts but one, seen from the two sides of a single choice about where a people keeps its power. The strength that limits reach is the strength that resists capture. To see only the first is to read the headless order as the victors wrote it. To see both is to read it as it was.

A note on sources. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's account of the Nuer as an "acephalous" society ordered through the "balanced opposition" of segmentary lineages is drawn from his *The Nuer* (1940) and the paired volume *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940), as

reproduced and discussed in the anthropological literature; the characterisations are paraphrased. Marshall Sahlins's argument that the segmentary lineage is "an organization of predatory expansion," massing through automatic fusion ("all of us against them") without central command, is drawn from his 1961 essay of that title in *American Anthropologist*; the quoted phrases are given as reproduced in the scholarly record and are paraphrased in substance. Ibn Khaldun's theory of *'asabiyya* — its origin in hardship, its role in the conquest of soft sedentary dynasties by hard peripheral groups, and its dissolution over three to four generations of rule — is drawn from the *Muqaddimah* (1377) as rendered in the standard translations and the secondary literature; it is paraphrased, and the generational figures are given as Ibn Khaldun gives them. James C. Scott's argument that upland Southeast Asian statelessness was a deliberate, reactive adaptation to evade valley states — peoples "barbaric by design," rendered illegible and uncapturable on purpose — is drawn from *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009); the quoted phrase is given as reproduced and the argument paraphrased. The observation that segmentary systems are "suppressed as competing powers" under strong states is drawn from the anthropological reference literature on segmentary lineage systems and paraphrased. The historical cases are drawn from the standard record: the Aztec and Inca conquests by seizure of the imperial centre; the British capture of the Sokoto Caliphate through its inherited apparatus (treated at length in the Northern Nigeria study in this collection); the sixty-year expense of British Kenya over a headless Kikuyu order (the Kenya study in this collection); the two British expulsions from Afghanistan and the eventual buffer arrangement under Abdur Rahman Khan (the Afghanistan study in this collection); the Iroquois Confederacy's council of unanimity and its self-description as unconquered by European settlers; and the dismantling of the Scottish Highland clan system after Culloden (1746), including the conversion of chiefs into landlords "by policy, paperwork, and profit," which is quoted from the popular historical literature as reproduced and paraphrased in substance. Where figures or datings are contested they are given as the sources give them.

Legibility is not pardon, and here the discipline runs the other way: to name a people's headlessness as a source of strength is not to romanticise it, for the same diffusion that resisted the conqueror also denied its people the scale to withstand him in the end; and to name the concentrated state's victory is not to credit its account of why it won. The trade-off is stated as a mechanism, not a verdict — the reader is owed the arithmetic of reach against resilience, and left to weigh what each people paid for the setting of the dial its history chose.

The arithmetic is laid out. The sum is left to the reader.

Part of the collection Patterns of Power. Tested, never revealed.